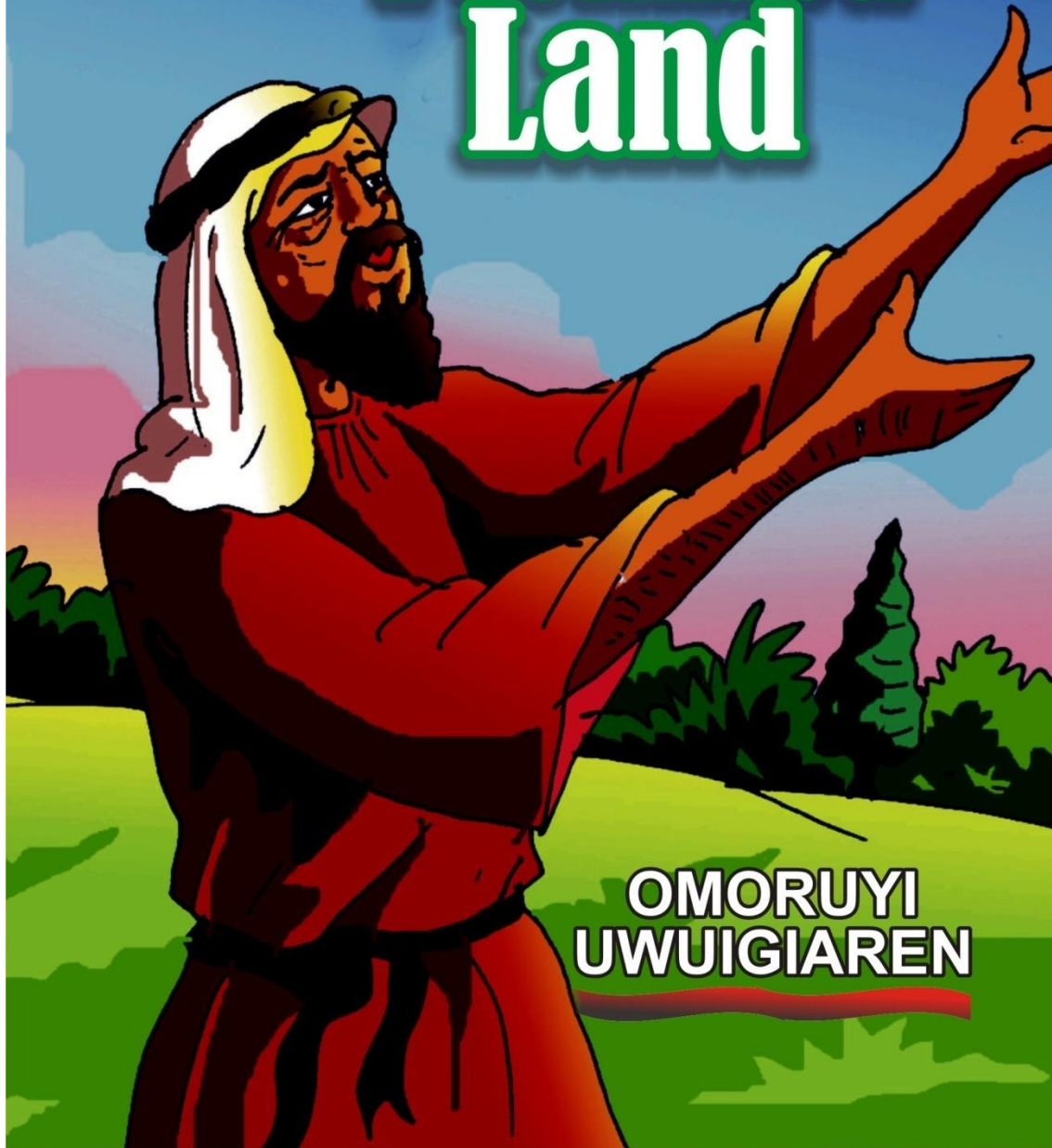


# The Promised Land



## **THE PROMISED LAND**

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# **ONE**

## **The Thirsty People**

Moses was a great leader. God asked him to lead the people of Israel to the Promised Land. A special place that He prepared for them. On their way home, the people cried out for water because they were very tired and thirsty. Some of them even fainted as a result. There were no wells or rivers around to draw water. All they could see were rocks! As the cry for water grew, Moses took his brother Aaron to a corner, where they fell on their knees and prayed to God for help.

God heard Moses and Aaron and came down to meet them. “Moses, I have heard your prayers. Gather the people and speak to the rock. The rock will give water, which will be enough for the people and their livestock to drink. Is that clear?”

“Yes, my lord,” Moses said, bowing his head gently.

God smiled down at them and moved into the shadows.

Moses rose to his feet. He grabbed his rod with an iron grip and swallowed hard. Rather than stay happy for his prayers that were answered, he became flushed with anger. It was easy to tell why he was angry. He was frustrated by the unbelief of the people of Israel.

Aaron, together with Moses went back to the people. Angry, Moses said to them, “You rebels, why cry over little things? Must you drink water from the rock?” Before the people could say a word, Moses raised his rod and hit the rock twice. Water came out of the rock. The people and their animals drank and were happy. While everyone including Moses drank to their fill, God watched them sadly from His throne. Moses did not do what he was asked to do.

## **TWO**

### **The Water of Meribah**

While the people drank water from the rock like there was no tomorrow, God looked on in anger because nobody said “thank you” to Him. Moses and Aaron did not tell the people that God provided the water. The people thought Moses was the one that made the water to come out of the rock!

Later on that day, Moses was alone. He sat on a log of wood, probably thinking about the Promised Land. God then appeared from the evening shadows and walked up to him. “Moses!” He tapped his shoulder.

“Yes, my Lord,” Moses raised his head and answered, smiling.

“Come,” God wore a frown. Moses rose to his feet and followed Him to a corner.

“What have you done?” God thundered.

“What? I did what you asked me to do,” Moses shrugged. “I did not do any wrong.”

God shook his head as He breathed fire from His nostrils. Fuming, God said, “No, you failed, Moses. I did not ask you to hit the rock. I instructed you to speak to the rock!” Red with rage, God crossed His arm over His body. “I was always there in your time of need, but you took me for granted. You forgot me! I made you, and the



world is mine! Since you did not tell the people that I gave them water, you will not take them home!”

Moses fell on his knees, with his hands stretched out and palms up. He cried out, “Ah! My Lord, I did not mean to hurt you. I was angry and I forgot...”

It was rather too late as God’s voice echoed as He walked away, “It is normal to be angry. It is only wrong if you cannot control yourself in anger!”

## **THREE**

### **Moses on the Mountain**

It is good to get to the end of a thing. Moses always wanted the best for his people and he was always there for them.

After the meeting with God, Moses had a meeting with the people of Israel. He told them to be good to one another and to strangers. After the meeting, Moses walked to his tent. As he laid down to rest, God came into the tent. He walked to the side of the bed where Moses had laid down to sleep. “Moses!” He tapped him on the shoulder and Moses woke up. As he raised his head to check who had tapped him, he saw a bright light by the

side of his bed. God cleared His throat and said, “We need to talk, Moses.” The bright light shone even brighter as the figure of God stood tall with crossed arms.

Moses rolled out of the bed and sat up. He lowered his head and avoided eye contact with God. “I am listening, My Lord!”

“Not here,” God smiled faintly. “Follow me!” He turned and walked quietly out of the tent. Moses rose from the bed and followed Him.

They had a walk out onto the field. After covering a good distance, and a huge silence hung between them, God cleared His throat and said, “You have done enough

for these people, Moses. Your time is up. Leave the people alone and go to Mountain Abarim and die!”

Shocked, Moses said, “I don’t understand, My Lord.”

“You are a good man. You have done enough for mankind. It is time you stepped aside for another to lead,” God revealed, gazing into space.

“Why? But I am still young? I can carry on much longer,” Moses protested.

“No. you cannot. You are old. It is my grace that has brought you this far, Moses. You have done well. Another must lead.”

“My lord, you sound as though you have not forgiven me,” Moses cried. He began to sob gently.

God gave Moses a pat on the back. “I have forgiven you, my friend. The truth is, you need a break. There are chances that you will offend me again and I don’t want that to happen. I love you, Moses. As you know, you are the meekest man on earth. You have served me well enough. You deserve a break.”

“I am a just judge. I don’t want you to offend me again. How can I kill or destroy a man that I so much love? Moses, it is not your fault. The people are also part of the reason you did what was wrong in my sight. Listen, you should be happy that I will bury you myself. Such are only reserved for men of good conscience. Go now.”

Moses shook his head as tears began to roll down his face.

“Don’t cry, Moses. I have nothing to lose if I bury you,” God smiled.

It was a hard move, but what could Moses do? He wiped his tears with the back of his hand and walked away. God watched as Moses walked up to the mountain.

Moses never aged. He was like a man of forty years old even when he was already over eighty. That is the work of your God.

## **FOUR**

### **The Valley of Hope**

Getting to the Promised Land was hard. It was not easy. Moses walked up to the mountain. From the top, he could see the beautiful cities in the Promised Land.

As he looked at the cities, God appeared to Moses again. Now they stood side by side gazing the beautiful earth from the peak as the wind blew gently. Then God said, “These are the good things that I said I will give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am happy that you have seen them. But as I said, you will not reach there. It is sad because you have really done well, Moses. I have nothing

against you.” He placed his hand on his shoulder and pulled Moses close. “My servant, you are old. It is time we moved on. Lie down and die. We shall meet in heaven.”

Then Moses lay on the ground and closed his eyes upon the light of the world. He breathed his last. As Moses died, God took his body to a valley in Moab and buried him there.



## **The Adventures of Nihu**

At daybreak, the forest walked briskly into brightness. Alive for the right reasons, it carried on its inevitable duty, to give light to the world. Happy birds sung aloud a morning song. One might be carried away, thinking there are some instrumentalists having a field day with their keyboards a little distance away. Nihu thought this as he sat up and yawned a million times. The beauty of the morning was like a bed of roses. Still comfortable in his apartment on the tree branch, the activities of the birds had stolen away the urge to sleep. When he looked quietly on every side, his eyes fell upon some monkeys, which prompted a beautiful excitement to overwhelm him. They had their eyes on him as they swooped from one tree to the other as if inviting Nihu to join them.

As he watched the fun, Nihu was struck by thirst. He reached for his water bottle so he could continue to observe the antics that lifted his spirits. There was nothing left. Thirst made watching the continuing monkey-sports difficult. He had to get water. Just one drink and he could be happy again.

He got down from the tree, and embarked on a journey to put his thirst under control. Knowing how he could be reduced by it, he slammed his rucksack on his back and traveled northward. As he proceeded further, he ran into a tree stained with blood. Flies hovered around it like bees in their hive. Nihu slowed down. He quietly went close to see the kind of insects that were on the tree. When he was considerably close, he noticed a hollow in the tree gushing out blood, which the insects were happily working on. Nihu's head snapped back. Gradually, he went backwards to find safety before the unknown could ravage him. As he tried to find his way, a big movement under the leaves, set his mind in disarray. He looked towards the direction; all he could see was bloodstains on the ground. He began to fight with his thoughts, pondering over what must be going on in this strange forest. *This is strange. Blood is everywhere. Maybe a wild animal just finished feasting on a prey*, he thought. *No, it cannot be. It must be something else.*

The tree gushing out blood reminded Nihu of the ancient Iroko tree, the home of witches and wizards. The tree looked like the last Iroko that had been felled by over fifty able-bodied

men with the assistance of some spiritual people whose families and children had been casualties of the powers that be in the countryside. Blood gushed from the tree the day it was brought down.

After the tree fell, hosts of people in the village died. They were those who met at the tree to donate blood and flesh of whomever they wished to send to hell. It was after the fall of the Iroko tree that the people realized they had been living in the midst of devils. But this tree was different. The stain was continuous, as if something had been dragged to the spot from somewhere else. Nihu followed the stains in the direction it came from as if they were precious things that could prompt a gold seeker to give away his hand to gain a piece of diamond ring.

He found himself in a traditional shrine where human heads and that of animals are sometimes used to appease the gods. As he fixed his eyes on the shrine, he remembered his trip to the stream with his father many years ago.

\* \* \*

The place was a long way from their home. The goddess Ijokpa, a demon that reared livestock and kept her fortress as clean as any well-bred village woman keep, ruled the land. As Nihu and his father headed up the hill that lead to the stream to get the water, which was believed to be medicinal, and could cure all sorts of stomach related ailments, Nihu broke the long silence that had reigned between them.

“Father, who owns these fowls?”

“Sssh. We do not talk too loud here. If you do, she could push you out of her territory. That is the least she would do to an ignorant person.”

“Who is she? Whom are you talking about?”

“Ijokpa. She has existed before our ancestors were born. She owns everything here.”

“What an old crone! What does she do with these hens, cockerels and goats? Does she sell them?”

“I don’t know. Not even our forefathers can tell why she is so delighted in keeping them.”

“Then she must be rearing them for a thief. Or what do you think Father?”

“No one dares touch them. If you do, you die. Let me take this opportunity to warn you, do not touch anything here. Do you hear, boy? There have been people who tried to steal her things—they ended up paying with their lives.”

“Then she is very wicked. Is she taller than Grandma?”

“I don’t know. But those who claimed to have seen her said she has two heads. One is that of a man, the other like a woman. She has a shrine over there. Some people visit the place. You can, too.”

“I’m not going there. I don’t want to be hurt.”

“She does no harm to a just person.”

“Are you sure? Can I meet her in there?”

“Maybe. Sometimes she is friendly. When one spends too much time farming, she alerts you; lets you know it’s time to go home.”

“How does she do that?”

“She pushes you out of the farm.”

“That’s interesting. Then I have to visit the shrine.”

His father stopped and put a hand on his shoulder, “Nihu, please, do not touch anything there. Is that clear? It would be good to return to me immediately after you set foot in that shrine.”

“Okay. I will return quickly.”

As they rolled down from the steep hill, Nihu raced to the far end while his father went to the stream to fill the water pot. As Nihu went, one of the cockerels making a meal out of some grains cleared his throat as if he wanted to say something. Nihu was startled. His eyes flew to every side to see if someone was nearby. When no one met his gaze, he peeked quietly into the shrine. A lifeless body lay massacred on the floor. Terrified, he did not bother to go in and left the place with devastating speed.

As his feet took him back down the hill, the cockerel that cleared his throat earlier, said, “Boy, have you seen who you were looking for?” Nihu screamed for all he was worth.

He was panting when he reached his father, “I found a dead man in the shrine!”

“A thief no doubt that came to steal her things. That is exactly what she does to unjust people.”

“Not only that, a cockerel spoke to me. But I didn’t see her.”

“Only the gods could determine who would see their nakedness.”

“What do you mean, father?”

“If she wants you to see her, she would have revealed herself. Let’s go.” Nihu clung to his father as they left the stream.

\* \* \*

Nihu now remembered standing in the shrine in front of a headless body covered in blood with feet chopped off. The corpse had been opened as if a doctor’s knife in a laboratory had cut through it. Nihu trembled and folded his hands close. *Why all this is happening to me*, he wondered to himself. *If I had known, I would have asked the king to execute me. That would have been better than wandering in a place I have no knowledge about. A place where everything is evil and one could be sent to hell with the snap of a finger.*

In the far end of the shrine, his heart jumped into his mouth. With a yell, he ran out of the place at the speed of light. Suddenly, he missed a step and fell. As he battled to his feet, a creature as thin as a rope and with an eye as large as a crystal ball came out of the ground behind him. He attempted to crush Nihu with his club. Nihu ran the race of his life, the ugly creature giving hot chase. As they whipped past bushes, trees, limbs, dead woods and shrubs, it was obvious that the devil would not spare the boy a breath if he eventually caught hold of him. Nihu raced like a demon whose place in the future would be determined by how well he could maneuver the pair of legs that carried him.

The path led to a swamp. Wailing and shouting at the top of his voice, he waded waist-deep through the mud to the other side. As the one-eyed creature approached the swamp, he faded from the chase. Gradually, the creature sunk into his underworld home. His crystal ball eye glared out as the Earth finally swallowed him.

No longer hearing the crashing of branches or the sounds of his pursuer, Nihu looked back to see if the devil was still in the chase. Trying to keep his pace and looking back at the same time, he crashed into a tree. After a time, he recovered consciousness and moved to relax in the quiet of the dewy morning. The cool smell of a river met his nose. His eyes peered anxiously, looking for the solution to his thirst. The river was just behind the trees. An observer might be tempted to believe some gardeners must have worked here many years ago. Planting the trees in a way that would help people who visit the river to find shade where they could relax after swimming or washing themselves in the river. The sight was comforting, and Nihu was cheered.

Nihu rose like a discouraged man who has just seen light at the end of a dark tunnel. He threw the ugly experience he just had behind him. Then he got hold of his rucksack with a firm grip and raced on rickety legs towards the river. When he got close, he threw his sack on the riverbank and threw himself into the river. Washing and drinking happily, he was soon lost in pleasure. He swam in every direction.

Meanwhile, old Philominenges, a bald man living alone in the Lonely Forest, was behind a tree quietly watching Nihu in the river. The old man had been cleaning his musket when he heard a shout at the river that was not too far away from his little hut. First old Phil thought the noise was a roar from a wild animal grabbing their usual fun. So he loaded his musket and went quietly to the place to see if he might catch a good meal. But the hope of finding a rhino or hippo was dashed when he got close enough to see the boy. He decided to watch from a distance before making any decision that could make or mar his destiny. What must have brought such a person to a devilish place where the hope of a better life hangs in the cruel hands of fate, he wondered.

After sometime, Nihu came out of the river and went to brush his pair of boots. Soon they were clean and good to look at again. He filled his water bottle and hung his bag carefully on his back to start on his journey once again.

As he shuffled off, Old Phil followed quietly. He stole along so carefully, Nihu did not notice the old man behind him. Around a corner of the path, Nihu ran smack into a warthog making a meal out of a dead animal. The warthog charged. Nihu took to his heels, heading back to where he came from, the angry warthog in hot pursuit. Nihu thought his time had surely come. He raced, screaming to the high heavens as the warthog gradually closed on him.

Old Phil, who had seen everything shouted, “Boy! Climb any of the trees ahead of you. Just climb, the devil will retreat!” His voice sounded to Nihu as if an angel was ministering to him. He threw himself upon the next tree and climbed to the top in a hurry. He was just in time as the warthog charged up furiously. Still intending to teach Nihu a lesson, the animal began to hit the tree with all the strength he had.

As the tree shook with each ferocious hit of the warthog, Old Phil climbed another tree not too far away and took his aim at the rampaging devil. The bullet pierced its skull and the warthog roared in agonizing pain. The warthog finally bade the world goodbye at the foot of the tree after the old man sank two more bullets into his head from the same distance.

Slowly, Nihu came down from the tree. The heavily bearded old man in a coat made of animal skin approached him.

“Are you all right?” he asked the boy, stretching out his hand.

“Yes, I am all right. Thank you for saving my life.”

“You are welcome.”

Nihu shook Phil’s hand. “Do you live here?” he asked, smiling.

Old Phil returned the smile saying, “Too early to discuss my adventures here. We shall talk when we get into a very safe place. No holy thing exists here. We have to leave this place right away. Other warthogs might soon be on the look out for this one before us. If they eventually find him here with us, it would spell doom for us. The devil in them might bring us low. Warthogs in this part of the world are brutes that are never fair with their prey. They are strong-willed, and have what it takes to bury a thousand army. So it is better to avoid them.” He got hold of the dead animal, slammed it over his shoulder, and started off.

Just then, a beastly hand came out of the tree and took hold of Nihu. He screamed and tried to shake it off. But the evil already had a firm grip on him and began to pull him into the tree. Old Phil threw the warthog down and came to battle for Nihu’s life. As Nihu wailed and cried, Phil pulled him one way, while the hand pulled him another. Finally, the old man went for his musket. He quickly buried two bullets into the hand. The wrist that grabbed the boy fell, while the other part retreated into the tree. Nihu was free, but the hand that fell began to crawl in their direction. The boy hid behind the old man as he sank two more bullets into the wayward hand, at last putting the devil to rest. Without saying a word, Old Phil got hold of the warthog and they hastened away.

They had just covered thirty yards on the bush path when they almost walked into the back of a demon standing more than thirteen feet tall. His name was Anjonu, and he was clothed in a flowing white garment. Sometimes he could appear as a dwarf covering himself with a mat and walking on the air. Hunters and farmers who entangle him never return home with good songs on their lips. Instantly, the heads of the boy and the old man began to swell. Old Phil, a quick-thinking warrior in his heyday, managed to pull Nihu and himself behind a tree. Right away, their heads returned to normal and they began to pant like a couple of terrified lizards.

Nihu whispered, “I can’t explain what happened to my head when I set my eyes on that devil.”

“That’s what happens when one sets eyes on him. We are very fortunate he didn’t see us.”

“Are you sure he didn’t see us? But he was standing on the road.”

“If that devil had seen us, we would have become imbeciles. That is the least of what he could do. Even the most powerful army on Earth cannot survive his onslaught.”

“Are you sure?”

“Boy, I am very sure. Before I served in the village army, I was a proud hunter. I have plenty of experience running through this baldhead. Anyone he sees will be useless. He doesn’t even need to cast a spell before one becomes a nit.”

Nihu took a deep breath. “What do we do now?”

“Nothing!”

“Nothing? What if he comes after us?”

“Then we would say our last prayers, while we book a passage to the silent world!”

“But you have a gun—can’t you use it on him?”

The old man chuckled. “Guns have no use against him. You can only deal with Anjonu when you follow the rules that were handed down to us by our ancestors. I expect you to know the rules. You don’t go out late at night, you don’t go to the stream on a sunny afternoon, and you have to watch your back when you go to the farm very early in the morning.”

“Let’s try another way. Or let’s go back.”

“I can’t take that risk. Something tells me he is not out for us. You can see he is not facing this direction. That means he might soon leave.”

“How soon?”

“I don’t know. We have to wait. Patience wins the race of exploit. Whether in the farm, forest or on a market day, you can run into Anjonu very early in the morning, in the sunny afternoon or late at night.”

The explanation began to work in Nihu’s mind. Now he began to understand what he had seen that sunny afternoon he went to the farm to get the tubers of yam his father had left in a basket. He got them and decided to rush to the river to wash the tubers to take them to the market. Earlier, his father told him not to do this, for it was an abomination for anyone to go to the farm on market day. But greed and eagerness to start earning money at such a tender age led



to the disastrous act. Anjonu always roamed the forest or the farm on a market day and could destroy anyone he found.

While Nihu waited for the tubers to dry, he heard a strange sound behind him. He turned to see a short creature covered with raffia palms, whose legs were not touching the Earth, and spinning like a whirlwind. Nihu's head began to swell. He took to his heels leaving the tubers behind.

While Nihu's mind was still busy, remembering, old Phil tapped him, "Boy, he's going away. My guess was right. He is not out for us."

Nihu heaved a sigh of relief, "I was reminiscing about the encounter I had with Anjonu a few years ago. I was dumb for days afterwards. It wasn't until after my father sacrificed a black goat and a white fowl at a three-way junction to appease the gods that I finally recovered."

"You were very lucky. Because if he went for you, you would have been a dead person."

"I disobeyed my parents. I went to the farm on a market day."

"What? Do not do that again. Such an offense hanging on your neck, you are like a man that commits murder."

"My father told me that too."

They waited quietly behind the tree until Anjonu finally walked into the forest. Then they got up and went quickly away.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **THE TRAGEDY OF MACQUESEMIS**

Wits and might are far too irrelevant to be deliverance for anyone. Moreover, it takes more than human discretion to survive in this part of the world. It is a tragedy to remain in a world you cannot control and all the more tragic if you do not have control over your own life. People who have surrendered leadership of their lives to others are always at the mercy of those they serve. Such was the tale of Macquesemis.

It was a lazy sunset. Old Phil stoked the fire as the boy watched the warthog roast. The thatch roof had courageously withstood the heat of the day. As smoke went up high to rest on the bosom of the fair weather, Old Phil scrubbed ashes off the animal and broke the long silence that hung between them. He cleared his throat. “Boy, what brings you here?” he asked quietly.

“The King’s order. I was wrongly accused.”

“Oh, I understand. All criminals are innocent until the day they are caught. Please, do not feel offended for what I have just said. Or do you have any evidence to prove your innocence?”

“Yes, I have. The arrow I shot only struck a tree and I saw it. The next day, I was summoned to the palace to meet the King—who had been basking in the euphoria of palace life, and was accused of murder.”

Phil dropped the carved wood scraper that he had been using against the carcass. “It happens everywhere. People sometimes pay for what they do not know about. Nevertheless, I will be the last person to vouch for a hunter. His shot could go anywhere. Most especially in the forest, it could bring you a fine meal or usher a prince into silence. In hunting, shots go where we never directed them. The arrow may have struck a tree or it could have strayed away. So the King could be right.”

“No. I saw it hit the tree.”

“Then how did people find it in the body of a man?”

“That’s a mystery. I still don’t understand how it got there.”

“It’s no mystery. It was just a silly mistake that cost you your freedom. Although, I am not a diviner, maybe I would have been able to tell how your arrow ended where it did. However, mistakes

make our world go round. When we learn from our mistakes, it makes us richer in experience. I would have gone for my arrow if it had struck a tree. If you have done that, you will not have found yourself here. That is the bitter truth, boy.”

Nihu heaved a sigh of relief. “You are right. My youthfulness was my undoing. I was not wise. I should have gone for the arrow.” His countenance fell as he sat back against the tree behind him then added, “What brings you here?”

Old Phil took a deep breath and replied, “My ordeal is an adventure I would have avoided if I had not been bewitched by arrogance. That was my downfall until my mid-thirties. My experiences over the years have helped me become a better man. I had a good friend, called Macquesemis, Macques for short. He was a man of innocence, and had a large farm in the countryside. He was blessed far more than his contemporaries were, including me. Women, whose beauty can throw men off their feet, flocked around him. One day, thieves visited his rich farmland and made away with what he had in his store. As for Macques, they tied him to a tree and left him with nothing.

“As they were leaving, he heard one of the thieves saying they should head southward to consume the loot. Eventually, one of his servants set him free. That terrible day, I visited him and when I heard the misfortune that had befallen my friend, I was moved with compassion. A kind of wicked anger came over me and I was bound to avenge my rich friend, for I had benefited greatly from his generosity over the years.

“I joined the party that organized to go to the south to recover the loot. Before the sunset, we set out for the journey, riding hard on our horses. My anger was already reaching the high heavens. Macques is a friend for whom I can fight with my last ounce of strength. We picked up the bandits who had yet to reach the mountains. If they had gone up, it would have been almost impossible to find them or recover the goods of my dear friend. The mountains are full of caves. Most thieves I have run aground when I was a soldier have a cave or two where they keep their loot. However, they were by the wayside, making merry, thinking that no one would come for them. While they were dancing happily round what they had stolen, we fell on them like jungle raindrops pelting a window.

“Macques and I were ex-service men. We have seen the horror of warring and the victory of survival. We know the rules of the game, which in our army states when you find your enemy hit him hard and harder until you can no longer find his shadow. So, we fell on them massively and fought like Trojans all day long. Our men were falling like primitive people that fall stone dead at the blast of muskets. The rule in our army says save yourself first before you help another man. That was why I stood

my ground, and fought for my safety, not to lose my neck while trying to save another man when not in the best position to do so.

“In the end, Macques and I were the only people that survived from our camp. People trained to work the farm, were all lying dead on the plain. Some faced the sky like happy people, while others had their faces buried in the red Earth as if they were paying homage to a powerful god above.

“The bandits also suffered loss. My sword made mincemeat out of the soldiers that came against me. Macques’ big belly did not hinder him from throwing himself here and there like a wildcat. They fell like leaves before us until there was just one man left alive. Their leader was a man whose long hair almost reached his shoulders with two incredibly large eyes sitting on his sun-tanned face. He was covered in grime and sweat and had bloodstains on his animal skin coat. Blood of our men that he had crushed with an iron axe held in an iron grip.

“I pounced and hurled a blow that could sink the Titanic. However, I missed because he dodged, and I almost lost my balance. Were he to have lashed out at me with his axe, it would have spelt doom for a one-time war veteran like me. My heart jumped into my mouth, but Macques was there. As I regained my footing, I called to Macques to stay away, that I could handle the foul toad that had much height to his advantage.

“As I got up to face him, the devil gave me a blow that cut through my helmet to my head. It hit me like a sledgehammer. Nevertheless, as a soldier, I intended to punish him dearly. I fought back gallantly in the pool of my own blood for it was the only way I could remain alive. My next blow felled the iron axe from the devil’s hand. He yelled as if he had just lost a vital part of himself. The axe fell too far away for him to recover it quickly. I also had my axe displaced in the process. Since we could pick up our weapons, we faced each other like wrestlers in the old tradition that ultimately determines who is the strongest man in the local district. He roared like an old wounded lion. I beat my chest for I was ready to give his remains to the bald vultures that were already waiting patiently for the dust to settle so that they could begin their feast. We fell upon one another and although not properly trained to fight without weapons, I could cope in the game of body slamming. The leader of the thieves was a brawny brute and got the upper hand as we traded punches. The ballistic missiles he threw, none would survive. As they rained down, I would whine like a miserable dog that has just been robbed of ears and tail.

“Soon we could no longer cope with our hands. Mine dangled as if I had lost total control of my arms. We began to stagger here and there. Bleeding and losing strength, I sought a means to break the deadlock. At any moment, he could throw a lucky punch that could mark my end. I remembered my knife and drew it from my boot, stabbing the hard fighter in the chest. He yelled up to high heaven and tried to

bite, but I fought gallantly out of his dreadful grip. As he fought to remove the knife, I limped to my axe and exacted a mighty heave that zapped off his head. I had no strength left in me.

“I was breathing like an antelope that had escaped the attack of a predator when the King’s guards arrived. They must have been informed of the bloody battle in that part of the local district. They arrested Macques and me and detained us for many days in the King’s stockade.

“After this investigation, the King ordered us to his palace saying that we were guilty of murder. We had taken the law into our hands instead of informing him so that his army could have arrested the gang of thieves. My belongings and that of Macques, including his large farm were seized. We lost all we had inherited from the army retirement. We were given the choice of banishment or execution. But we chose to be banished, hoping that we could still find a better tomorrow after we had have served our punishment in this Lonely Forest.” Old Phil paused at last after the long oratory.

“That’s quite a story. So where is Macques?” Nihu was transfixed.

“That man of innocence. Old Macques was an encourager, bold and manly.” He pointed to the coat he was wearing, “I made this coat out of a deer he killed. It is quite good clothing. I have had it for over a year. My old friend died a few days ago. A mamba snake bit him when he was felling a tree. So I buried him at the foot of the tree behind you.”

“Why the foot of a tree? You should have buried him in the field as is the tradition in the countryside.”

“That way is not befitting for Macques. He had been a hard worker who had taken many hits all his life. I wanted the cool breeze and the shelter of a serene world to blow over his grave. Maybe that would send him comfort anywhere he is. Because he died in great pains, I made a befitting rest for him so that his ghost will be happy.”

“It is unfortunate he died. Do you not grieve? Since you loved him so much, I would have expected you to have done that.”

“There is no call for grief. You find no cure for ailments here. This place is death. I do not know when I will meet my maker, but I know he is coming.”

“I pray we survive.”

“I am sure of it. I have just a few days left to spend in this Lonely Forest. I would have been so happy if I had made it to the end of my time here with Macques. But now, I will be starting my public life all alone if I make it to the countryside in the next weekend.”

Nihu's face fell. "So you mean I will be here all alone?"

"Are you not man enough? You have no choice, my boy. Since Macques' death, I have been living alone. You can too. If you were wrongly accused as you claim, the Almighty will surely protect your life."

Nihu pondered that. "When you get to the countryside again, will you marry?"

"That's the least of my worries. I have many things I must do. I must find a job, perhaps as a gardener, to keep my mind busy and forget the ugly past. That does not mean I will not have anything to do with women. I prefer to make concubines out of women rather than keep in the lap of a woman all the rest of my life."

Nihu quieted at last as Old Phil took up the wood scraper he had dropped at the beginning of his reminiscence and continued to scrub the roasting meat. At last, the meal was ready. "I love this warthog, Nihu," Phil remarked. "It tastes like flesh of mutton, doesn't it?"

What Old Phil said was ignored because Nihu's attention was on a creature a few poles away. When he realized the boy was not listening to him, Phil tapped him in the shoulder and said, "What is it? What are you looking at?"

"Look there!" Nihu pointed. "I saw a dwarf holding a mat over there!" Old Phil raised his eyes in the direction and did not see anything.

"I didn't see the monument you said was standing out there. On the other hand, has he gone for shopping in the village square? Let us keep our fingers crossed. Maybe he will be back soon." He grinned.

"Believe me. I saw a dwarf standing near that oak tree."

"I do not doubt your ability to see beyond your nose. However, where is the creature you claimed was standing near a tree? Oh, maybe the devil is playing hide and seek game and wants us to be part of the fun." He chuckled and turned back to the roasted warthog. The tasty supper was reviving his spirits.

"You don't believe."

"If I tell you I do not believe, we must go on arguing about a creature that cannot prove or disprove his existence. And if I tell you I saw the dwarf, then I am not sincere, because all I see is darkness."

"The creature disappeared the moment I saw him."

Old Phil took a deep breath and said, “If what you say is so then you must have seen one of the Agbere demons that roam the forest. They are nomadic dwarfs. They have no home, no shelter and no place of their own. Whenever evening rolls in they roll out their mats and pass the night wherever they happen to be.”

“He was too far away. I could not see if he was hairy or not. The mat he held was considerably small. He had nothing else with him. Apart from the animal skin around his waist, he had nothing on.”

“Don’t look down on that dwarf. What he’s got is enough to make you smile all your life.”

“What does he have?”

“That mat of his is priceless. It’s worth more than a sack of diamonds and can be used to produce charms.”

“You mean it?”

“Of course. If it were not dark, I would have suggested we go after him. If we get that mat, whatsoever we want, will come like a flood. All you need do is sitting on the mat and make your wish or request.”

“Then the darkness can not hinder us from getting that mat. If I get it, I’ll wish not to remain in this forest anymore.”

“Such a wish is worth it. Anyone trapped here would do likewise. But what if as we try to collect the mat, the dwarf pounced on us? Our survival would depend on which way the wind blows. We either wait for providence or the cruel hand of fate to take its toll.”

“I don’t think it’s going to cost us our lives.”

“Boy, what an old man would see while seated, a younger man standing would never see. Put your rashness behind and be logical. If we were barely able to survive the onslaught of the devils in the day by chance, what do you think could happen to us if we chase a dwarf in a night so dark that we can hardly see what is lurking? I must confess, chasing that dwarf tonight is like building a castle on your nose or fighting against one’s shadow.”

Nihu’s frustration mounted. He inhaled sharply. “I wish we could go after the dwarf. If it is so very difficult to get the mat, how do hunters get it at all?”

“When the dwarf is asleep, sometimes they roll off the mat and lay on bare Earth.”

“Apart from that, is there no other way one could get the mat?”

“Apart from what I have told you, any other way would eventually be a highway to hell. Because the fortune you would make out of Agbere’s mat is almost equal to the evil you would face when he discovers you have his mat!”

Old Phil got hold of his musket and got to his feet. “I have had enough for one day.” He went into his hut and Nihu had no choice than to follow and to put the day behind him.

***If you enjoyed the excerpt of the “Adventures of Nihu” and you want to read the entire story or have it in your library, visit [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and purchase the paperback. Thank you.***

## **About the Author**

Omoruyi Uwuigiaren is a Nigerian who writes middle grade adventure fiction and picture books. Some of his books include: *The Adventures of Nihu, the City Heroes and other stories from the heart of Africa, the Mystery of Taiwo Da Silva, the Promised Land, Jane the Good Girl, Shadows in a River, the Little Okon and the Outside World, Giant in a Hut and the Little King.*

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